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ABSTRACT

A preliminary study was conducted to draw a profile of older adults who participate in educational programs on college campuses and to identify those older people who are not being served. The college and university programs surveyed in this study were drawn from a list of College Centers for Older Learners (CCOL) recently described in a publication issued through the Institute for Lifelong Learning. From 92 CCOLs contacted through a mailed survey, 56 usable surveys were returned (61 percent). The survey form requested data on numbers of participants over 55, their ages, income levels, marital status, housing arrangements, racial or ethnic composition, employment status, status of health, and education. Although not all of the responding centers had data on all of the dimensions surveyed, the results obtained do confirm earlier studies. The older people being served in college programs are usually better educated, retired, in fair to good health, and in the middle to high income brackets. Those individuals not being served by these programs can be characterized as minorities, people in poor or frail health, of low income, poorly educated, and lacking adequate transportation. In an open-ended question at the conclusion of the questionnaire, several respondents stated that many elders do not participate because they are not comfortable on college campuses or are fearful of academic participation. However, one statement summed up many others: although people with little education and near poverty level or who do not feel comfortable in an educational background usually do not enroll, when such people do enroll, most enjoy the experience. (KC)

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OLDER STUDENTS IN COLLEGE PROGRAMS: A SURVEY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE COLLEGE CENTERS FOR OLDER LEARNERS

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OLDER STUDENTS IN COLLEGE PROGRAMS: A SURVEY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE COLLEGE CENTERS FOR OLDER LEARNERS

Carol Barnes

Throughout the past decade, there has been a phenomenal growth of campus based educational programs for older adults including summer programs such as ELDERHOSTEL and locally designed education/vacations as well as an increasing number of tuition waivers for class attendance at colleges and universities across the United States. ELDERHOSTEL alone has grown from an initial enrollment in 1975 of 220 participants on five campuses to an estimated enrollment in 1986 of 142,000 elders on over 1,000 campuses worldwide (Elderhostel Bulletin, 1986). During the academic year, colleges have hosted older learners in a variety of educational settings. In 1976, Florio conducted a nationwide survey of 816 colleges and universities across the country. The results of that survey indicated that of 286 reporting institutions, 84 percent had programs for older learners (Florio, 1976). Beyond the availability of individual courses from the regular curriculum and special workshops and seminars for older adults learners, campuses have established a number of "College Centers for Older Learners" as they were recently designated by the Institute of Lifetime Learning (AARP, 1986).

A number of recent studies have focused on the learning capabilities of older learners (Davenport and Davenport, 1986; Davenport and Davenport, 1985; Wass and Olejnik, 1983; Bennett and Eklund, 1983; Hooper, Hooper and Colbert, 1986; Furst, 1986; Woodley, 1984). Other studies have described the impact of older students on college campuses (Crimmins and Riddler, 1985; Durnall, 1985; Barnes, 1981; Jensen-Osinski et al, 1981; Lupin, 1984; New Directions for Continuing Education, 1983; Brazziel, 1987; Perkins and

Robertson-Tchabo, 1981; Schwartz, 1986-87; Versen, 1986; Tendall and McCarter, 1980; Nidiffer and Moore, 1985; Higgins and Perrone, 1984). Several attitudinal studies have focused on barriers older students encountered (Gunn and Parker, 1987; Kingston and Drotter, 1983; Dellman-Jones and Papalia-Finlay, 1983; Kingston, 1982).

With a few notable exceptions, however, there is little nationwide research on the characteristics of those older students who do participate in educational programs on college campuses. A large body of literature does exist on why older students do not participate (Peterson, 1981; Graney and Hays, 1976; Heisel, Darkenwold and Anderson, 1981; Harris Poll, 1975; Romaniuk, 1983; Leavengood, Rich, and Lewington, 1981). This preliminary survey had three objectives: (1) to further develop the survey instrument, (2) to build a profile of older adults who do participate in educational programs on college campuses and (3) to try to identify those older people who are not being served.

Method

The college and university programs surveyed in this study were drawn from a the list of College Centers for Older Learners (CCOLs) recently described in a publication issued through the Institute for Lifelong Learning. These centers were specifically chosen because they

> offer a stimulating college environment for older peer groups without the usual pressure associated with bureaucratic red tape, tests, and grades. These are not degree-granting programs but programs for the sheer joy of learning. Programs often are selected and/or taught by the participants themselves. Schools which promote such programs underscore not only an interest in providing educational outlets for the entire community but also an awareness of the significant talents and experiences that older people can bring to a campus (Institute of Lifetime Learning, 1986).

In addition, it was felt that these centers provide the most non-

threatening environments for older learners and should be representative of the kind of learning situation which would draw a wide variety of older people interested in the pursuit of knowledge. The Centers were also selected because they represent both small and large institutions located in urban and rural settings, and are assumed to draw from widely diverse populations.

Ninety-two CCOLs were contacted through an original mailing and a follow-up mailing approximately two months later. From the 92 institutions, 56 usable surveys were returned for a response rate of 61 percent. Another 10 survey forms were returned indicating that the kind of information requested was "not kept" or simply "not available."

Results

In order to determine the scope of the programs being surveyed, each CCOL was asked to report on the total number of adults aged fifty-five and over who were being served on a yearly basis. The average number of older learners being served yearly by the 56 CCOLs responding to the survey was 1355 persons. Although the questionnaire asked for the "number of adults aged 55 and over served yearly," a few of the respondents indicated the number reported was that of enrollments not individual persons. This may account for the large numbers involved.

Ages of the program participants were broken down into five categories: 55-65, 66-74, 75-84, 85-90, and 91+. The following chart shows the percentages for each category for the 55 programs which responded to this question.

Table 1

Percentages for Age Ranges Served (N=52)

Age ranges	Percent of Programs
55-65	94
66-74	100
75-84	94
85-90	71
90+	43

In answer to a question on the survey concerning income levels of program participants, over thirty CCOLs indicated that these data were not available for their programs. For those programs which did respond, 27 percent said they served people with incomes less than $5,000 per year, 67 percent indicated that their participants were in the $5,000 - $10,000 income bracket; 100 percent served people in the $10,000 - $20,000 income category; and 21 percent served people with an annual income over $20,000.

The following data were requested from each program: marital status, housing arrangements, racial or ethnic composition, employment status, status of health, and education.

DISCUSSION

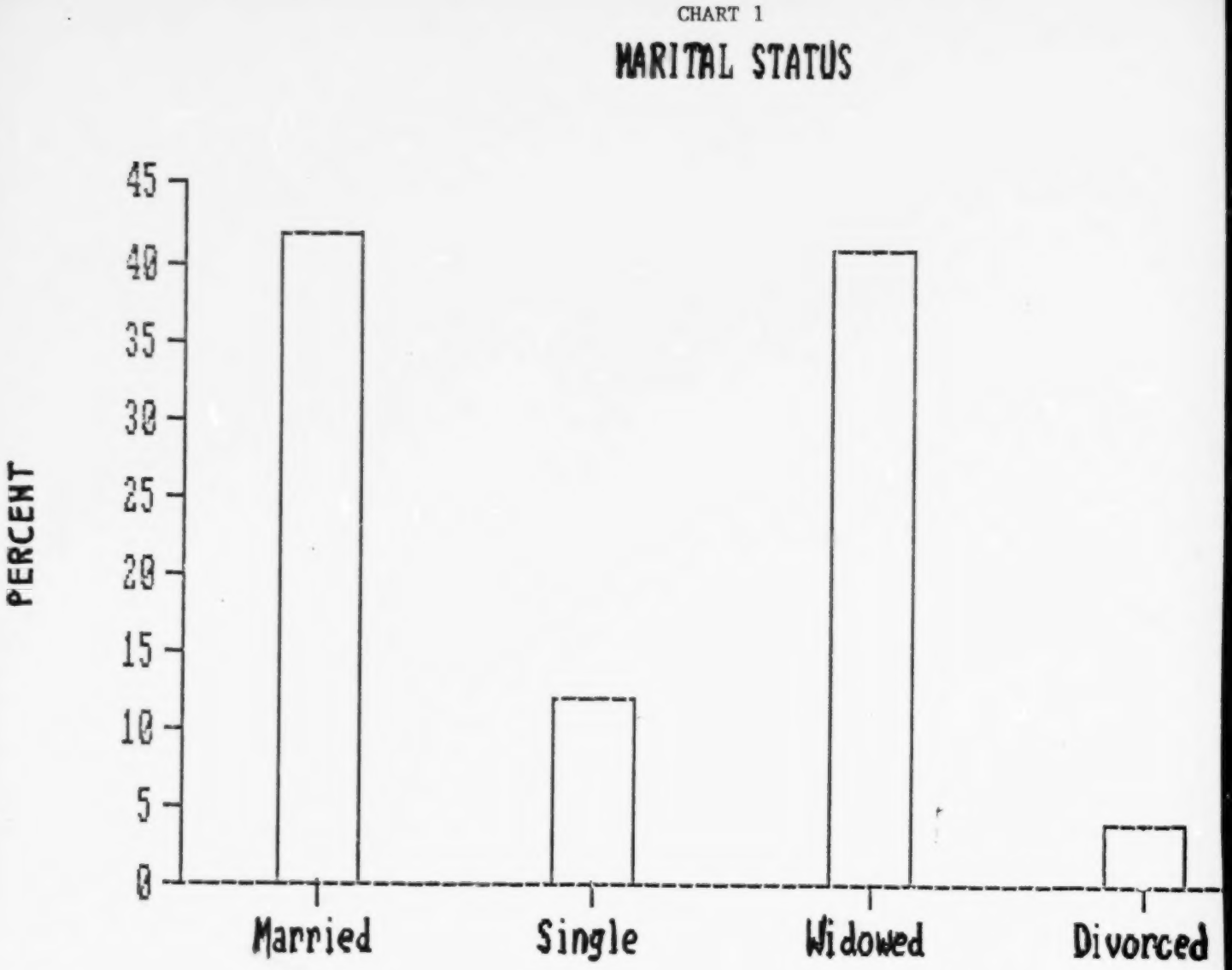
In reviewing Table 1, it is clear that most of the older students being served by the College Centers can be described as "young old" although 71 percent of the programs did indicate that they had clientele in the 85 and over age bracket. Similar results have been reported in three other surveys (March, Hooper, and Baum 1977; Hooper, 1981; Hooper and

March, 1978).

Several programs reported that they did not have data on income levels for their program participants. Of those who did respond to this question, all of the programs indicated that they were were serving people in the $10,000 - 20,000 income category. Over 60% of the programs indicated that their programming was reaching a number of people in the $5,000 - 10,000 bracket. It is clear that some educational programming is drawing lower income participants, but fewer people in the lowest income levels. A number of respondents stated that their programs were designed for very specific groups of older adults (e.g., middle-class professionals, high achievers from professions and other careers, college graduates) who would not normally be found in the lower income brackets.

The responses received regarding marital status (Chart 1, page 6) clearly identified two categories of participants--married and widowed. This finding is not remarkable if the reader considers that most of the widowed participant could be women who make up nearly two-thirds of the over 65 population (American Association of Retired Persons, 1986). In three studies conducted by Hooper and colleagues throughout the University of Wisconsin system over the past ten years, similar results were found (Hooper et al, 1977, 1978, 1981).

CHART 1


MARITAL STATUS
PERCENT
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Married
Single
Widowed
Divorced

The type of household (Chart 2, page 8), employment status (Chart 3, page 9), and educational status (Chart 4, page 10), results showed no unusual differences in pattern from previous characteristics of persons actively participating in educational programs for older adults. The highest percentage of participants lived either with a spouse or alone, a very high percentage were retired, and most had completed a high school education (Leavengood, Rich, and Lewington, 1981; March, Hooper, and Baum, 1977; Kingston and Drotter, 1983; Versen, 1986).

Of particular note are the results of the question on educational status and comments made by individual program directors. Chart 4 clearly indicates that the College Centers are serving nearly as many college graduates as high school graduates. To some extent this can be explained by comments such as the following from one project director:

> Ours is an academic oriented set of programs for individuals who have spent years in more or less rigid areas of expertise - who have now retired and want to pursue areas of learning which they never had time for while working.

Other directors made similar comments about their programs in explaining why the educational and economic levels of their participants were higher than would be found in the population at large.

CHART 2

TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD

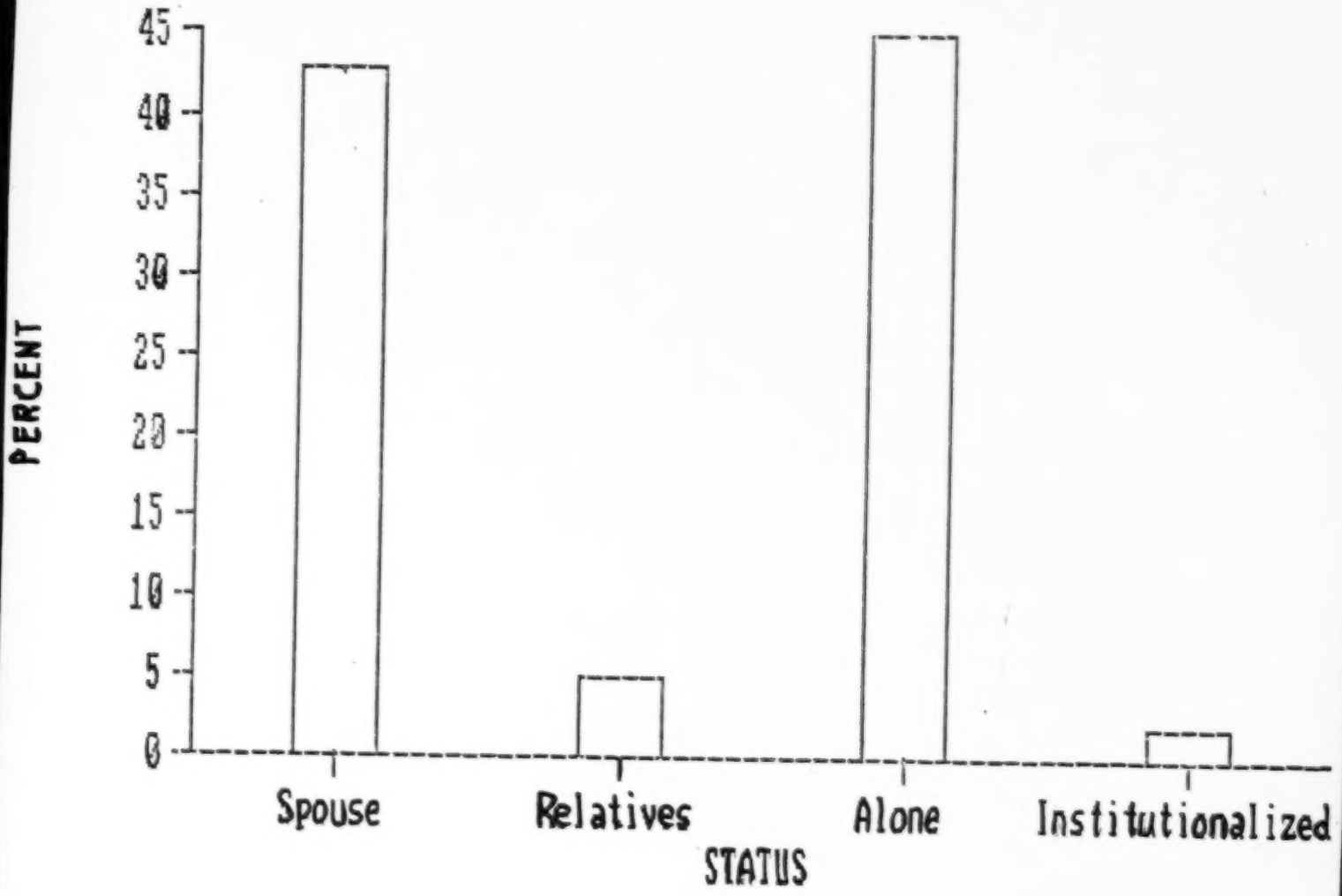


CHART 3

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

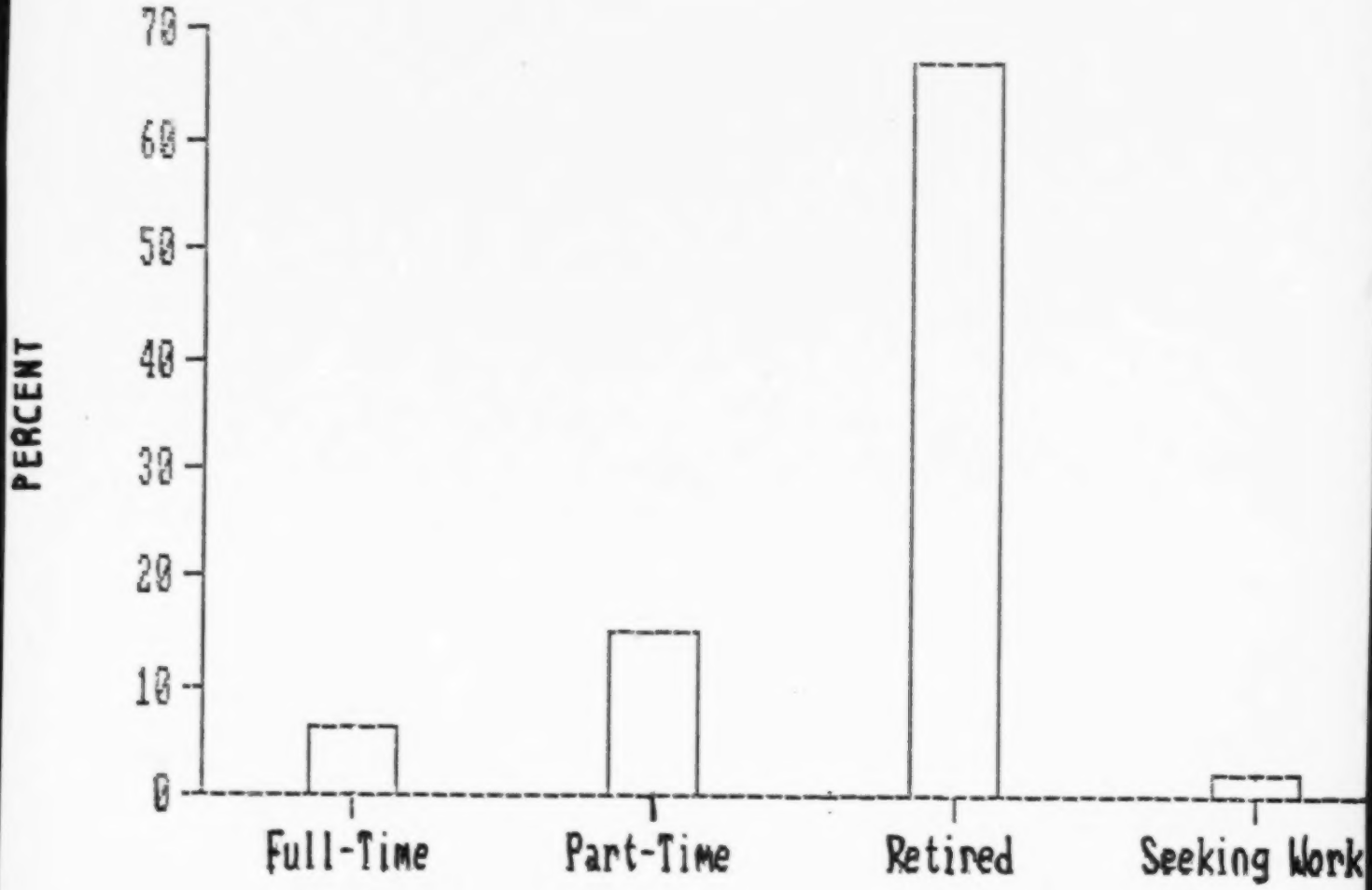


CHART 4

EDUCATIONAL STATUS

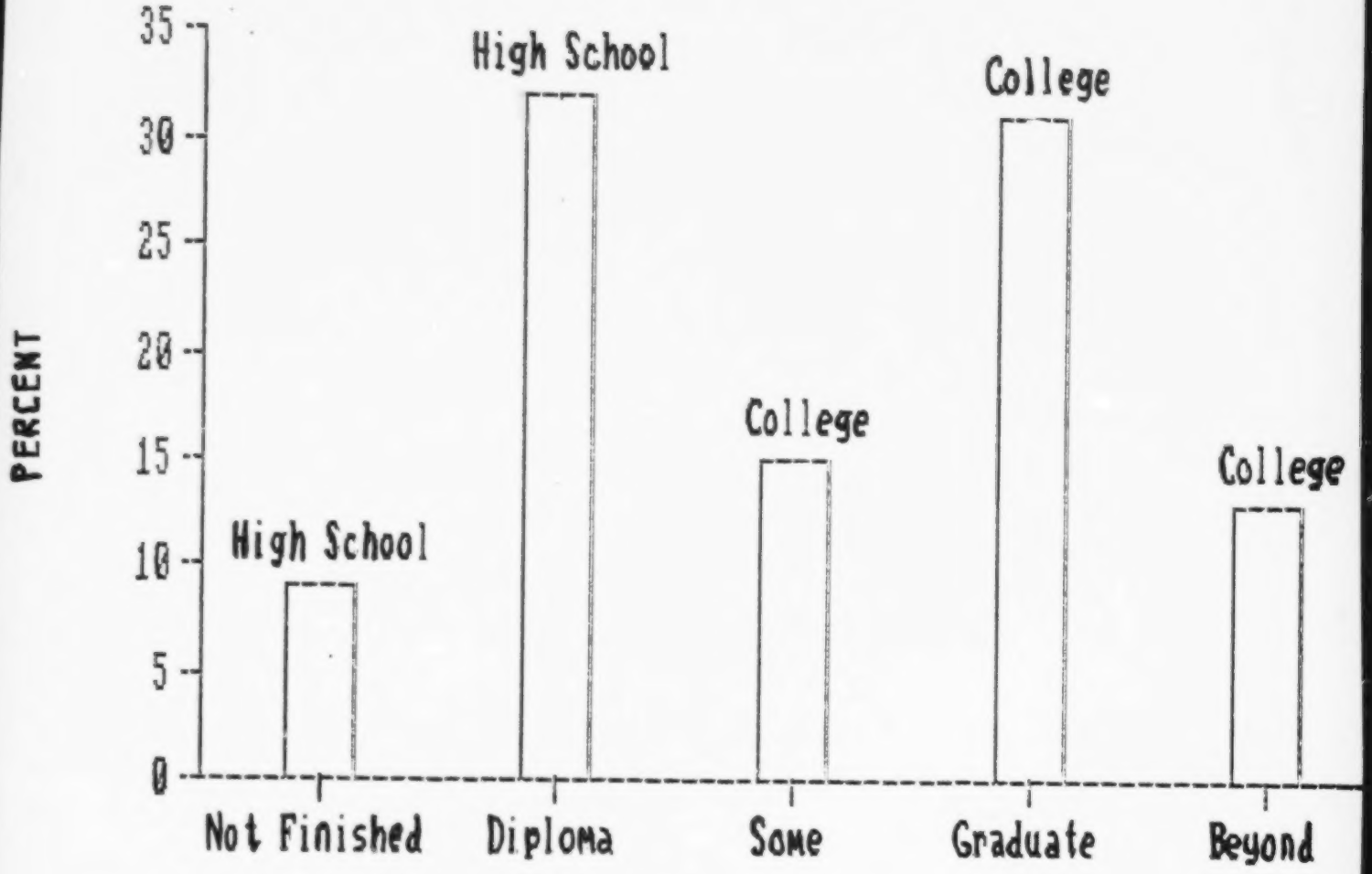


Chart 5 (page 12), shows the health status of program participants. With few exceptions, College Center respondents indicated that they were serving older adults in good health. In fact, in response to an open-ended request for further information at the end of the questionnaire, nearly half of the College Campus Directors made statements such as: "The older adults most inadequately served are those who are poorly educated, those who lack transportation, minorities, and those who are in poor health." A small number of programs do provide educational programming in nursing and other health care facilities, but the survey indicated that outreach programs were available through less than 5 percent of the reporting institutions.

CHART 5

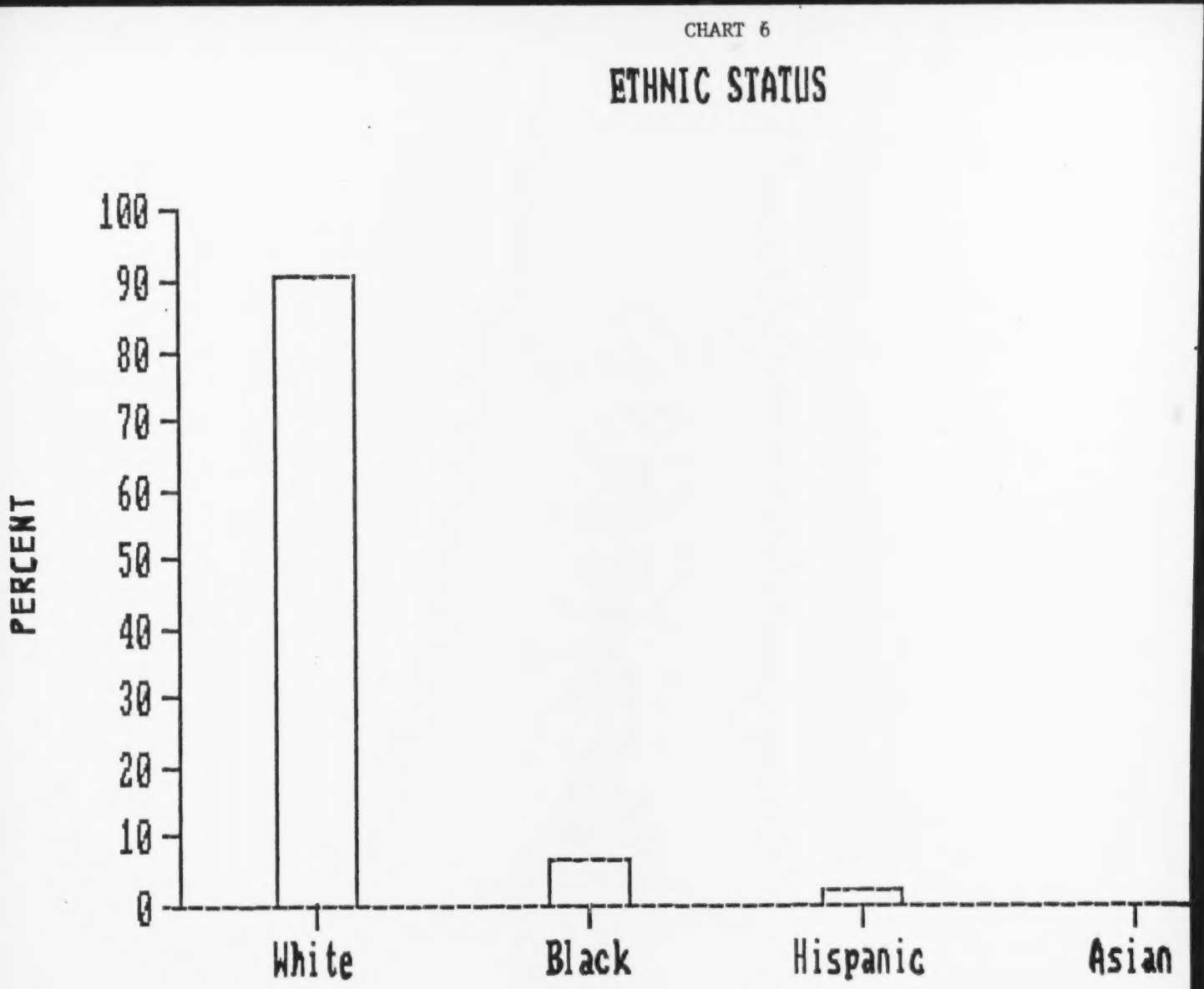
HEALTH STATUS

Finally, as was mentioned earlier, minorities are not being served by the College Center programs as Chart 6 (page 14) shows. The overwhelming number of participants in these academic programs are white. Once again over half of the respondents pointed out voluntarily that most programs of this kind do not reach minorities.

SUMMARY

Since this is a preliminary survey of the College Centers for Older Learners, there are a number of refinements which need to be made in the questionnaire. However, the results obtained do confirm the four earlier studies (Hooper et al, 1977, 1978, 1981; Kingston and Drotter, 1983) which characterize older people in educational programs as being younger, better educated, retired, in fair to good health, and in the middle to high income brackets. Those individuals not being served by these programs can be characterized as minorities, people in poor or frail health, low income, poorly educated, and lacking adequate transportation. In an open-ended question at the conclusion of the questionnaire, several respondents stated that many elders do not participate because they are not comfortable on college campuses or are fearful of "academic participation." Additionally, one respondent replied that some older people do not participate because they "are insecure, less assertive, less motivated, and therefore do not take the initiative." One statement summed up many others: "The older people we serve less well are those with limited educational background, at or near poverty level income, and those who do not feel comfortable in non-credit college classes because it is unfamiliar territory. If they do enroll, most enjoy the experience."

CHART 6


ETHNIC STATUS
PERCENT
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
White
Black
Hispanic
Asian

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